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AUTHOR Petersen, Bruce T.
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ABSTRACT

David Bleich's work in reader response and James Britton's composition research provide a theoretical justification for the use of composition in the literature class and for the use of literature in the writing class. Britton has found that talking about writing is valuable since talk is more expressive than writing. In the literature class teachers should be encouraging students to consciously write and talk about the associations they have to a piece of literature. Bleich proposes that the structure of our response to new experience, including literature, argues for a reanalysis of pedagogical practice in the literature class. Teachers should consciously use students' immediate responses to their readings to help them create knowledge about the text. Both argue that our first approach to knowing is founded on an emotional base. Our first response to literature is affective and our first response in the writing process is expressive--both are associated with personal concerns. This parallel argues strongly for an integration of literature and composition as a joint means to develop the cognitive processes which structure thought and language. (HCD)

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Bruce T. Petersen
Michigan Technological University

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Infinite Combinations: Integrating Composition and Literature

Compositions conferences, beside their stated functions, have become meeting places for the disenchanted and disheartened. It is not that we do not generate excitement about teaching writing; our disenchantment comes from a growing separation within the English profession between those of us who teach composition and those who teach literature. Indeed, one does not need to look too hard to find, after the convention's sessions, a group of writing teachers ensconced in a local pub discussing the political problems which beset our departments. We hear that literature scholars misunderstand us, consider us "flakey" and insubstantial; we hear that senior members of departments are "out of tune" and, dare we say, "frumpy" when it comes to composition. A noted contemporary comi has well expressed the collective lament of composition teachers: "We just don't get no respect." However, after joining in depreciation of the Mrs. Grundy mentality of the Milton scholar, I still often find myself walking home following a full day of composition work, a student trailing behind me carrying a cardboard box full of journals, wondering when I, too, will be actively teaching literature again. At such times I have come to believe there is only one way--the integration of composition and literature.

In the past whenever I considered this possiblity I remembered a comment from the director of composition at my graduate school: "How do you justify the combination? What will reading do for the writer, and what will the writer

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actually do for the reading?" Since I had long left behind the "models" theory of teaching, and as I was suspicious of the "topics for the essayist" approach I found myself unable to answer. However, recent research in writing and critical theory now offers teachers a powerful theoretical base for the use of composition in the literature class and for the use of literature in the writing class.

The work of James Britton provides the teacher with a rationale for encouraging private, personal writing; that is, writing in which the student "attempts to record and explore (his) feelings, mood, opinions, preoccupations of the moment" or writing "in which the writer chooses to approach his reader as though he were a personal friend. . ."(Britton, 89-90). Concomitantly, research in critical theory and reader response suggests that literary interpretation derives from a subjective dialectic between the text and a reader. Stanley Fish, Louise Rosenblatt, and David Bleich in particular have advanced our knowledge of the reading process and its relation to literary criticism. Bleich, for instance, proposes that interpretive validity arises from the sharing of subjective dialectics among members of a group motivated to develop new knowledge. (Bleich, 29) This paper proposes that the implications of Bleich's work in reader response and of Britton's composition research provide a theoretical justification for the integration of composition and literature.

Britton posits a developmental writing matrix grounded in what he calls expressive writing.(Britton, 83) Writing, Britton argues, moves "from an intimate to a more public audience" regardless of the purpose it is ultimately to serve.(Britton, 83) Britton thus grounds writing in the immediate, personal

life of the writer. This does not mean, of course, that writing does not move into other less obviously personal modes; but it does mean that the composing process begins in the self before it moves toward the search for appropriate modes of approach to an audience. Thus, the composing process reflects the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. Britton shows how writing serves various functions under different circumstances and for different audiences. However, Britton claims that the writer ". . . must relate his task, somewhere, to his own hierarchical construct system;" i.e., to his previous experience, knowledge, and mental structure. Britton goes to some length to argue this: "Whatever it is that provokes the decision to write . . . it soon comes to be seen in relation to all the writer's relevant previous experience. His conception, the way he explains to himself what he must do, is influenced by his involvement or lack of it."(Britton, 23) Britton appears influenced here by both Roger Poole and Michael Polanyi. Polanyi, in particular, argues that such self- explanation occurs because "every use of language to describe experience in a changing world applies language to a somewhat unprecedented instance of its subject matter, and thus somewhat modifies both the meaning of language and the structure of our conceptual framework."(Polanyi, 104-105) Only as an experience becomes ours, that is, becomes our personal concept, do we move toward testing the new concept outside of ourselves.

Britton urges teachers to combine writing and speaking in the classroom because he is conscious that part of the process of writing is a tacit relationship with an audience. Writing is usually intended to be directed toward someone other than the writer although the first steps in the writing process center on writing which explores the self. Britton finds talking

about writing valuable because talk is more expressive than writing and because "talk relies on an immediate link with listeners; . . . the rapid exchanges of conversation allow many things to go on at once--exploraton, clarification, shared interpretation, insight into differences of opinion, illustration and anecdote, explanation by gesture, expression of doubt . . ."(Britton, 29)

This connection between writing and speech Britton extends to encompass associations between writing, speech, thought, and learning. Like Janet Emig, Britton sees a close relationship between the writer's thought processes and his composing processes. Ongoing work in cognitive psychology suggests that Emig's and Britton's views on this relationship are correct. In regard to the issue under discussion their research directs us to consider the associations between thinking and writing. Britton argues that thinking and writing proceed from an expressive base into their several less expressive forms. Therefore, the teacher of literature is well advised to encourage the process of thought in its natural form by progressing from expressive writing (journals, diaries, first drafts, response notebooks) and discussion of that writing to more analytical formulations (essays, argumentative and research papers, final drafts).

In the literature class we should be encouraging our students to consciously write and talk about the associations they have to a piece of literature because it is in this way that they will most naturally see how the literature is newly made a part of them. Britton implies that it is only as students write out of themselves that they can make a subject or a text their own and thus compose and develop knowledge. Britton argues that the way we write is

related intimately to the way we speak and think. The self expressive and the relational aspects of the writing process mirror similar functions in the way we develop language and thought. These two functions stem, Britton says, "from two aspects of language . . . perhaps best distinguished by the terms 'expressive' and 'communicative,' though the underlying idea is related to the kind of distinction we are making rather loosely when we speak of personal and impersonal writing, to the much wider question of the interrelationship of affective and cognitive thought process, to the foundations of language itself involved in Susanne Langer's discussion of presentational and discursive symbolism, and, more recently, to Roger Poole's attempt to reduce the question to one of subjectivity and objectivity."(Britton, 26-27)

This argument of Britton's provides a convenient introduction to David Bleich's theory of literary criticism. Bleich bases subjective criticism on epistemological assumptions drawn from study in the philosophy of science and from cognitive and psychoanlytic theories of personality development. Psychological research, in particular the work of Erik Erikson, has shown how personality is grounded in the emotional history of the individual. For the first year and a half of life a person's primary development is emotional and physiological; that is, affect dominates the child's perception of and relationship to other individuals. What we consider abstract and concrete thought does not begin development until after the psychic work of personality development is well under way. Affect, therefore, appears to precede analytic thought. Recent theory has suggested that this relationship between primary processes and secondary processes continues throughout life.(Noy, 1979) Thus, Bleich argues, "the ongoing experience of peremptory feelings and images precedes the onset of deliberate thought. This basic developmental fact

finds its aftermath in adult life in the peremptory nature of emotional experience, its automatic presence in our consciousness, a presence controlled only by deliberate mental activity on our part, and sometimes not even then . . . any new perceptual experience stimulates an emotional response immediately, and our thought about this experience is a reaction to our emotional response plus the experience, rather than to the experience alone."(Bleich, RF, 5)

Bleich proposes that the structure of our response to new experience, including literature, argues for a reanalysis of pedagogical practice in the literature class. Because the natural structure of our reactions to a text moves from emotional bases to intellectual consideration, Bleich says we should consciously use students' immediate responses to their readings to help them create knowledge about the text. Subjective criticism claims that the most fruitful study of literature arises from the desire to make or compose meanings and not from a desire to discover meanings in the words of a text. Our first encounter with a book is emotional and we re- articulate or re-symbolize the author's symbolization of his experience only as we are motivated consciously to do so. Indeed, for Bleich, the value of interpretation rests primarily in its communal validation: interpretation, he argues, serves adaptive human drives for community, for identity, and for approbation. Bleich thus centers his class on written responses which the class exchanges, discusses, and eventually develops into shared knowledge. "The object of attention is not the item itself but is the response of those who observe it. The assumption derived from the objective paradigm that all observers have the same perceptual response to a symbolic object creates the illusion that the object is real and that its meaning must reside in it. The

assumption of the subjective paradigm is that collective similarity of response can be determined only by each individual's announcement of his response and subsequent communally motivated negotiative comparison. This assumption is validated by the ordinary fact that when each person says what he sees, each statement will be substantially different. The response must therefore be the starting point for the study of aesthetic experience."(Bleich, SC, 98)

Bleich's argument relates directly to Britton's work in composition. Both Bleich and Britton argue that our first approach to knowing is founded on an emotional base. Our first response to literature is affective and associated with personal concerns; our first response in the writing process is expressive and associated with personal concerns. The similarity between writing as Britton describes it and reading as Bleich describes it suggests that both processes are grounded in a psychological process which underlies learning and thought. This parallel argues strongly for an integration of literature and composition work as joint means to develop the cognitive processes which structure thought and language. Bleich's and Britton's work thus implies a need for pedagogical change. Their separate research shows that in practice we do not seek knowledge only because we want to know something ourselves. Rather we are motivated to develop knowledge which we will share with others. For the adult the search for knowlege always forms part of a communicative matrix grounded in the fundamental psychological need to share our concepts and ourselves with others.

Perhaps because I am part of a humanities department I am made particularly conscious of the lack of humanistic values reflected in the schism I described

at the beginning of this paper. The integration of composition and of literature seems valuable to me partly because it also implies the re-integration of the people who teach both areas. Thus, my argument in this paper follows the very path Bleich and Britton describe. I initially responded to a situation about which I felt concern. That situation and my response to it developed into a search for knowledge, for solution, and has ended in my sharing the knowledge with you. A community of motivated respondents already exists and is evidenced by the recent suggestions towards and integration of composition and literature of Charles Bazerman and Randall Freisinger. But, whatever formulation an eventual integration takes I can think of no more valuable goal for English departments and the people who make them up in the eighties.

Bruce T. Petersen
Michigan Technological University

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